

Trail and Greenway Safety



One of the most common concerns of landowners along a proposed trail route is the effect of the trail on the safety of the neighborhood. People fear that the trail will serve as a criminal access route to their homes. In fact, though this fear is understandable, it is unwarranted: crime rates on and adjacent to trails are lower than average crime rates across the country. Why? By prohibiting auto access on the trail, and encouraging neighborhood watch over the community from all sides, a carefully designed trail can increase safety. According to the Rails to Trails Conservancy, "Lawful trail users serve as the eyes and ears of the community"¹.

Strikingly Low Crime Rates on Austin Hike and Bike Trails

The Austin Police Department recently compiled data regarding the location of crimes since 1995². Police officers use a premise code to describe locations of crimes. One code is for hike and bike trails and Town Lake. Similarly, there is also a code for parks and playgrounds. In 1995, a total of 38 crimes occurred on hike and bike trails out of 42,586 reported within the city limits of Austin. For the first 6 months of 1996, a total of 7 crimes out of 20,564 crimes occurred on hike and bike trails. For this time period, the majority of crimes reported were non-violent, with 65% of all crimes on hike and bike trails being thefts. **The Austin Police Department found that hike and bike trails are statistically safer than parks and playgrounds, with 7% of all crimes occurring in parks and playgrounds, and less than .1% of all crimes occurring on hike and bike trails.**

I've been listening to the press coverage of the Austin trails issue. The one point I keep hearing is that property owners do not want to see an increase in trails in and around Austin because it will increase crime. Apparently, any trails that connect Austin with suburbs will prompt criminal youth or adults to launch off, on foot, on a suburban crime spree. Which prompts me to ask the question - why would anyone walk ten miles to rob my house when he can just hop in a car, get on a public highway, and drive over?

Austin resident, Austin American Statesman, November 27, 1996.

Across the Country, Greenways are Low Crime Areas

Austin is not an anomaly in its level of trail safety. Other areas have studied the affect of trails and greenways on safety. Despite the numerous types of trails, from urban areas to rural counties, rail trails to waterfront walkways, the figures are surprisingly similar. Greenways are one of the lowest crime areas in the country!

Pinellas, Florida

In 1992, only twelve of the 10,000 crimes reported for the town of Dunedin were on the Pinellas trail, a rate of only .1%³.

Burlington, Vermont

For the last two years, police calls on the trail have consisted of .0013% of all calls, making the trail one of the safest places in Burlington. Due to concerns about the possibility of sexual assaults occurring on the trail, this issue was researched. It was found that there had been 0 reports of this type of crime on the path. Overall, the

Chief of Police says, "my position is that the Bike Paths proposed for Chittenden County communities provide a healthy way of linking neighborhoods and are likely to have a positive affect on the overall safety of the public"⁴.

Raleigh and Charlotte, North Carolina

In a survey given to 261 trail users in Charlotte, and 320 persons in Raleigh, trail users were asked to rate their security and fear of crime on the greenway⁵.

In Raleigh: (Urban greenways)

59% no problem
26% a minor problem
11% serious problem
5% very serious problem

In Charlotte: (Suburban greenways)

75% no problem
19% a minor problem
5% serious problem
1% very serious problem

This survey focused on perception of crime, for Raleigh and Charlotte greenways. Actual crime rates for the City of Raleigh are significantly lower. According to Raleigh's Chief Park Ranger, there were 30 incidents of crime in a 4.5 year period, on 25 miles of greenway trails.

Denver, Colorado

A study of public safety issues was undertaken by the Colorado State Trails Program and The Conservation Fund⁶ in 1994 to determine if trails had an effect on quality of life or public safety for single family homeowners or renters along trails. Of those surveyed: none of the residents have had a trail user steal from their property, and only one respondent attributed vandalism of his property to the existence of the trail. By adding lighting, the vandalism problem was resolved. Despite this, the family did not feel threatened by the incident, or that the trail should be closed. Of those interviewed, 72% believed that the trail had increased quality of life in their neighborhood. Only 7% felt it had decreased quality of life, 14% believed the trail has had no effect, and 7% were undecided. None of those surveyed felt that problems on the trail were serious enough for it to be closed.

Denver area police officers who worked on these trails were interviewed regarding their knowledge of trail safety. One comment made by the officers is that trails are unlikely to be used to access homes for break ins. "People like their cars and are more likely to depend on them, rather than a bicycle or foot, if they were to commit a crime".

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¹ Rails-to-Trails Conservancy. 1994. "Rail Trail Opponents: The Twelve Most Frequently Asked Questions."

² City of Austin Police Department. August 1996. "Crime Comparison on Hike and Bike Trails".

³ Eastman, Susan. "Opponents Fear a Trail of Crime". St. Petersburg Times. December 6, 1993.

⁴ Searles, Brian R. Letter to Herb Dufree, staff planner. July 23, 1991.

⁵ Furuseth, Owen J. and Altman, Robert E. "Greenway Use and Users: An Examination of Raleigh and Charlotte Greenways." Carolina Planning, Fall, 1990.

⁶ Conservation Fund and Colorado State Trails Program. March 1995. "The Effect of Greenways on Property Values and Public Safety".



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